

Playing the Long Game

By Ann Rolfe

Would you pass the marshmallow test?

It's about delayed gratification. Can you resist the temptation of an immediate small treat, on the promise of getting twice as much if you wait?

Walter Mischel, of Stanford University, studied nursery school children (4-5 year olds) to see what they did when offered a choice of eating one marshmallow (or cookie or pretzel) immediately, or waiting and having two. The study was not so much about whether they would or wouldn't eat the treat, but what they would do if they decided to wait, to help them resist temptation. Footage of kids trying this is funnier than a cat video, but the significance of being able to resist temptation came much later.

The kids were followed up in later life, when their delayed gratification skills were related to:

- Higher SAT scores
- Better social skills
- Better scores in a range of positive life measures
- Lower likelihood of obesity
- Lower stress reaction
- Lower rates of substance abuse

Why does delayed gratification matter?

As adults, delaying gratification, using willpower and self-regulation – where you choose to sacrifice a short-term gain, in exchange for a longer-term result, is not easy. Yet it can bring major benefits. Playing the long game means you:

- Contribute to superannuation while you're young, because one dollar invested in your twenties, is worth two in your forties
- Average 7-8 hours of sleep per night, because poor sleep has a major impact on health and performance

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- Bite back sarcastic or derogatory comments, because they will not help team-members collaborate to achieve the goal you are working on
- Take a role where you know the manager mentors team-members to build capabilities and leadership, over one that just offers more money, because it strengthens your career prospects.

Success in life and career often means choosing to do what is hard, rather than what's easy, being disciplined rather than distracted, hanging-in for a long-term result rather than giving in to temptation for short-term pleasure.

What about external influences?

Most of us are sorely tested by distractions in the environment.

- On our screens, constant pop-up ads tailored to our interests, notifications from apps, headline news, links in articles and click bait, take us deeper down the rabbit hole.
- In the supermarket, point of sale displays, specials and discounts, bright colours and (often misleading) labelling with tiny and complex fine print persuade us to buy products with little or no nutritional value
- At work, constantly changing priorities, multi-tasking, the cult of "busy-ness", unrealistic deadlines, unclear goals and arbitrary rules and lack of meaningful feedback make a sense of consistent progress difficult

Long hours, stress, tiredness and will-power-fatigue drain our ability to make and stick to a decision to delay gratification.

Is willpower something you can build?

Fortunately, studies have shown that the willpower some kids show in "Marshmallow Test" is not something you either have or you don't. It is an ability that can be learned at any stage of life.

Like muscle, the willpower you need can be exercised and strengthened over time. You start with tiny challenges, exercise daily, notice the small, incremental progress, consistently practice until your new behaviours become good habits.

Expect set-backs and be prepared to pick up where you left off quickly rather than slide back to square one. Deal with temptation by removing it (I won't buy chocolate because if it's in my fridge, I will eat it) or substitution using the "if ... then" rule (if I am hungry between meals, then I will eat fruit).

Is it worth it?

You decide. It's not a matter of giving up all the pleasures of life, but determining your priorities and deciding when it's worth making sacrifices for something more important that doesn't come immediately.

Take a look at your goals. Whether it's career or life, chances are you'll need to make and stick to decisions that test your resolve. Think of the alternative, what will happen if you constantly indulge in short-term pleasure to the exclusion of long-term benefits.

Talk to your mentors, read about your heroes, find out what worked and what didn't for them. Check out the science and reliable sources.

Resources

Better than a cat video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo4WF3cSd9Q>

James Clear (blog) <http://jamesclear.com/willpower>

Harvard Business Review (article) <https://hbr.org/2011/02/nine-things-successful-people>

Heidi Grant Halvorsen (book) 9 Things Successful People Do Differently
<https://www.amazon.com/Nine-Things-Successful-People-Differently/dp/1422193403>

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